MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

MP-IDSA
Commentary

Coercive Diplomacy at Play: The Greenland Outcome

Ajey Lele

September 28, 2026

Summary

The US, Denmark and Greenland trilateral security pact strengthens US military and space presence in the Arctic region.

On 18 September 2026, US President Donald Trump announced that the US had reached an agreement with Denmark and Greenland that would give Washington permanent control over security and other related requirements in Greenland, for 'perpetuity'. Trump said the US could do whatever was necessary in Greenland to secure the region in general and the US military structures in particular. The US also offered a technical justification, stating that 'sovereignty' over the region would remain with the Kingdom of Denmark.[1] The US, Denmark and Greenland formally signed the historic trilateral security pact on 22 September 2026 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

This announcement marks a substantial expansion of the US strategic role in the Arctic, particularly amid growing geopolitical competition in the region, including the expanding strategic interests of Russia and China. In his address to the UN, President Trump said the US would immediately begin developing a large military presence at appropriate locations, including building two major military bases.[2]

President Trump had expressed interest in Greenland since his first term in office. However, during his ongoing second term, he became much more assertive. He suggested that the US could use military force to take control of Greenland or pay Denmark to transfer the territory to the US. It was an exercise in coercive diplomacy, and the message was clearly not restricted to Denmark alone, but also to the wider NATO alliance. The US already had extensive military access to Greenland under a foundational 1951 bilateral defence treaty. Eventually, intense diplomatic pressure from the US secured enhanced base rights and blocked foreign adversaries.[3]

During Trump 2.0, serious efforts could have begun in late March 2025, when US Vice President JD Vance visited Greenland, accompanied by the US National Security Adviser and Energy Secretary. This visit could be perceived as a pressure tactic by Trump to advance his agenda of purchasing the autonomous Danish territory or compelling it to merge with the US. This latest agreement could be interpreted as a compromise against Trump's earlier maximalist position of military takeover; however, in all probability, that was a deliberately adopted negotiating strategy. He knew that any attempt to acquire Greenland, particularly by force, would be difficult to justify, especially given Greenland/Denmark's association with NATO. By adopting

[1] Oliver O'Connell, Max Matza and Adrienne Murray, **"Nato Welcomes Greenland Deal as Trump Says It will Give US 'Permanent Security Control'"**, *BBC*, 19 September 2026.

[2] **"Trump Signs 'tremendous' Arctic Security Deal with Denmark, Greenland"**, *Al Jazeera*, 22 September 2026.

[3] **"Agreement Between the Government of The United States of America and the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark Together with the Government of Greenland"**, The White House, 22 September 2026.

a highly assertive and coercive diplomatic posture, Trump may have secured American strategic objectives.

For several decades, Arctic geopolitics was largely discussed in terms of environmental governance, climate change, indigenous rights, commercial shipping routes, and the development of natural resources. The Arctic Council's establishment in 1996 institutionalised this approach.[4] For all these years, security considerations have also shaped Arctic geopolitics, though with less focus. Nuclear deterrence and strategic access to the region have always been important, particularly for Russia and the US.

It now appears that the US is keen to adopt a more aggressive posture in the region and will therefore expand its military presence in Greenland. The relative emphasis on cooperation and non-military issues in the Arctic region may become less prominent in the near future, as NATO is also becoming more militarily active there. The Arctic and the High North are becoming much more important to NATO's collective security. Seven of the eight Arctic states are NATO members, and the Alliance has therefore intensified military exercises, surveillance and operational coordination in the region. Launched in February 2026, Arctic Sentry is a multi-domain activity designed to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence posture.[5]

Under the 22 September 2026 agreement, the US will expand military access and basing rights, including modernising Pituffik Space Base and establishing additional defence areas at Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig. The agreement also provides broader US access to Greenlandic territory, airspace and territorial waters. No non-NATO states would be permitted to establish any military installations on Greenland.

One less discussed dimension of Greenland's strategic importance is its role in the US space and missile-defence architecture. The Pituffik Space Base, formerly Thule Air Base, is the northernmost US Department of Defense (DoD) installation and is operated by the US Space Force. Its strategic location supports three critical missions: missile warning, missile defence and space surveillance. The base hosts an upgraded Early Warning Radar to detect and track ballistic-missile threats. The satellite-tracking facilities provide telemetry, tracking and command support for US and allied satellites.

Pituffik offers a strategically important high-latitude position for monitoring both developments in the Arctic and activities in space. Now, as the US works to

[4] **"About the ARCTIC Council"**, Arctic Council.

[5] **"Arctic Security"**, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 24 July 2026.

strengthen missile-warning and tracking capabilities against increasingly sophisticated threats, including hypersonic and manoeuvring missiles, the important of this base is likely to increase. The US Space Force now needs a more resilient, layered network of space- and ground-based sensors. More importantly, the US has already accepted that it has put weapons in space. Obviously, it would need to upgrade key facilities to fight wars in space, if required.[6]

The US is already investing in consolidating the military infrastructure at Pituffik Space Base. In January 2026, the Pentagon sought up to US$ 25 million for runway lighting, a river-crossing bridge and other airfield improvements to enhance flight operations at the Arctic base. The upgrades are intended to improve the base's operational resilience in an extremely challenging permafrost environment and reinforce Pituffik's role in support of the US Air Force, missile establishment and space force.[7]

In August 2024, the US Army Corps of Engineers awarded a private company a four-year, US$ 323 million contract to modernise the backup power plant at Pituffik Space Base. The project includes temporary power arrangements while the existing facility is upgraded to provide greater and more reliable electrical capacity. This is particularly important because Pituffik is ice-covered for much of the year and supports various missile-warning, missile-defence and space-surveillance missions.[8]

The contract, which runs through 2028, highlights continued US investment in strengthening the facility's infrastructure and operational resilience. Against this backdrop, it could be argued that the US administration clearly understood its strategic objectives in Greenland and the Arctic. The recent agreement can therefore be seen as the culmination of a broader, carefully considered strategy to strengthen the US military and space-related presence in the region.

The agreement also identifies Narsarsuaq in southern Greenland and Mestersvig in eastern Greenland as locations for new US defence areas. These are old bases. Narsarsuaq was previously the site of the US Bluie West One base during the Cold War and has an existing airfield and deep-water access. At the same time, Mestersvig is a remote Danish military outpost used by the Sirius Dog Sled Patrol, a designated

[6] Ajey Lele, **"Trump's Arctic Ambition: Why Greenland is Crucial for US National Security and Space Warfare"**, *The Wire*, 24 January 2025.

[7] John Vandiver, **"Major Airfield Upgrades in the Works for US Military Base in Greenland"**, *Stars and Stripes*, 18 January 2026.

[8] Kristen Smith, **"Serco to Modernize Backup Power Plant at Pituffik Space Base Under $323M Contract; Tom Watson Quoted"**, ExecutiveBiz, 23 August 2024.

unit of the Danish Special Forces Command, that primarily patrols Greenland's challenging border.[9] Both these bases would give the US a more geographically distributed military presence across Greenland.

Amongst these bases, Mestersvig is significant because of its position on Greenland's eastern coast and its proximity to the GIUK gap, the maritime corridor between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom. An increased US presence at this base would help monitor movement between the Arctic and the North Atlantic. Narsarsuaq provides a potential southern access point and would help restore US military presence there.[10]

The US administration would likely be viewing a major role for Pituffik space base as part of its 'Golden Dome' missile defence programme. The base's strategic location could support future missile defence and space situational awareness (SSA) capabilities. This base could also support specific deployments of fighter and surveillance aircraft. Obviously, the purpose would be to strengthen monitoring and early-warning capabilities.

In recent times, the Trump administration has adopted three distinct approaches to statecraft. In Iran, the US has pursued direct military confrontation. In Venezuela, it pursued regime change by force, while in Greenland it used coercion primarily to shape the negotiating environment. These cases differ considerably in their geopolitical contexts and outcomes. However, the case of Greenland suggests that, under certain circumstances, the threat of the use of force may serve as a more effective instrument of diplomacy than its actual use.

[9] Abby Clark, **"Sirius Dog Sled Patrol: Denmark's Arctic Special Forces"**, Grey Dynamics, 23 January 2026.

[10] **"Desolate Arctic Outpost Likely to Host US Troops Under New Greenland Deal"**, *Reuters*, 25 September 2026.

About the Author



Group Captain (Dr.) Ajey Lele (Retd.) is Deputy Director General at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2026

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi 110 010 India
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191
www.idsa.in
Twitter @IDSAIndia
www.facebook.com/ManoharParrikarInstituteforDefenceStudiesAnalyses